

## **Reimagining Shakespeare in the Modern Drawing Room: Spatial Intimacy and Avant-Garde Performance**

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### **Abstract**

Shakespeare's works, celebrated for their universal themes and enduring relevance, have been adapted in countless ways over the centuries. This paper explores how his plays can be reimagined within the intimate confines of a modern drawing room, offering an avant-garde approach to staging. Drawing upon performance theory, spatial aesthetics, and contemporary theatre practice, the study highlights how this setting provides both constraints and creative opportunities. The drawing room, as a microcosm of domestic life, juxtaposes Shakespeare's grand narratives with immediate and personal realities, fostering deeper audience engagement and participatory spectatorship (Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Lehmann, 2006). The study concludes that such reinterpretations reinvigorate Shakespeare's works, ensuring their continued cultural resonance in the twenty-first century.

**Keywords:** Shakespeare adaptation; drawing room theatre; avant-garde performance; spatial aesthetics; audience engagement

### **Introduction**

Shakespeare's plays have long transcended temporal, cultural, and spatial boundaries, continually inviting reinterpretation and adaptation. Traditionally staged in large theatrical venues such as the Globe, contemporary performance practices increasingly explore unconventional spaces, including domestic interiors. This shift aligns with broader developments in performance studies that emphasize spatial fluidity and audience engagement (Schechner, 2013; Carlson, 2004). This approach marks a significant departure from traditional staging, offering a deeply personal and avant-garde lens for interpreting Shakespeare.

The modern drawing room, conventionally associated with privacy and domestic interaction, becomes a site where theatrical boundaries collapse. In such an environment, the distinction between performer and spectator is destabilized, creating an immersive and participatory experience. As Schechner (2013) argues, performance is fundamentally a negotiation between space, text, and audience, and unconventional settings intensify this interaction. In the drawing room, this negotiation takes on a heightened intimacy, as the physical proximity of the performers compels the audience to confront the raw humanity of Shakespeare's characters.

This paper examines how staging Shakespeare in a drawing room challenges theatrical conventions while amplifying emotional immediacy. By integrating avant-garde traditions, spatial theory, and contemporary case studies, it argues that this approach revitalizes Shakespearean drama for modern audiences.

### **Historical Avant-Garde in Shakespeare Adaptations**

The avant-garde movement in theatre has its roots in the early 20th century, when artists sought to challenge established norms and explore new forms of expression. Shakespeare's works, with their intricate narratives and complex characters, have been a fertile ground for such experimentation. The avant-garde movement has consistently challenged traditional theatrical norms, often using Shakespeare as a site for experimentation (Innes, 1993). Directors such as Bertolt Brecht, Peter Brook, and Jerzy Grotowski redefined performance aesthetics by prioritizing audience engagement, minimalism, and spatial innovation.

### **Brecht's Epic Theatre**

Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre emphasized the role of the audience as active participants rather than passive spectators. His productions often employed techniques such as direct address, minimalistic staging, and disruptive elements to alienate the audience and provoke critical reflection. Techniques such as direct address and minimal staging disrupted theatrical illusion, encouraging analytical engagement (Brecht, 2014). His adaptation of *Coriolanus* foregrounded political tensions through fragmented narrative structures (Mumford, 2009). This emphasis on audience awareness resonates strongly with drawing room performances, where proximity intensifies critical engagement.

## **Brook's Empty Space**

Peter Brook's concept of the "empty space" asserts that theatre can occur in any environment provided there is interaction between actor and audience (Brook, 1968/2008). His minimalist staging of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* demonstrated how spatial simplicity can enhance imaginative engagement. This principle directly informs drawing room adaptations, where spatial limitations necessitate creative expression.

## **Grotowski's Poor Theatre**

Jerzy Grotowski's concept of "poor theatre" further dismantled the reliance on elaborate sets and props, emphasizing the actor-audience relationship as the core of theatrical experience (Grotowski, 2002). In Grotowski's adaptations of Shakespeare, such as *Hamlet*, he reduced the play to its essential elements, creating an intense and visceral experience. His techniques, which often involved intimate and unconventional settings, underscore the potential of the drawing room as a space for profound theatrical engagement.

## **The Drawing Room as a Stage: Theoretical Frameworks**

The choice of a drawing room as a performance space challenges traditional notions of theatricality. Unlike conventional theatres, drawing rooms lack the architectural features that separate actors from audiences, such as stages, wings, and proscenium arches. This absence fosters an immersive and participatory experience, aligning with contemporary performance theories.

## **Spatial Intimacy and Audience Engagement**

The drawing room's intimacy allows for a deeper connection between performers and spectators. Erika Fischer-Lichte (2008), in *The Transformative Power of Performance*, argues that non-traditional spaces create "aesthetic encounters" that transform both the performers and the audience (Fischer-Lichte 52). In the context of Shakespeare, this transformation manifests as a heightened emotional engagement, where the audience becomes acutely aware of the characters' struggles and motivations.

Similarly, McAuley (2000) argues that theatrical space is not merely physical but relational, shaped by interactions between performers and spectators. In drawing room

performances, this relational dynamic becomes especially pronounced, as physical proximity dissolves conventional theatrical distance.

### **Breaking the Fourth Wall**

The avant-garde principle of breaking the fourth wall finds natural expression in the drawing room. In this setting, actors can directly address individual audience members, dissolving the boundaries between performance and reality. This technique not only enhances the immediacy of the drama but also compels viewers to reflect on their own roles as participants in the unfolding narrative. As Hans-Thies Lehmann (2006) observes in *Postdramatic Theatre*, “The spectator is no longer an observer but a co-creator of meaning” (Lehmann 134). In drawing room adaptations, this co-creation becomes a central element of the performance.

Contemporary scholarship further supports this participatory model. Freshwater (2009) and Alston (2013) highlight how audience involvement enhances engagement and redefines theatrical value. In drawing room adaptations, direct interaction with spectators transforms passive viewing into active participation.

### **Case Studies in Drawing Room Shakespeare**

The concept of staging Shakespeare’s plays in modern drawing rooms is not only an imaginative exercise but also a critical intervention in the traditional ways in which his works are presented. These productions engage with space, time, and audience in innovative ways, transforming Shakespeare’s timeless works into intensely personal and intimate experiences. Below, we explore some key case studies where directors have taken Shakespeare’s plays from grand, traditional stages and recontextualized them in the confined, yet emotionally charged, space of the drawing room.

#### **1. *Macbeth* in the Drawing Room: A Political Paranoia**

A noteworthy example of Shakespeare in a domestic setting is the 2015 production of *Macbeth* staged in a London home. This adaptation took place in a private residence, where the audience was seated in the same room as the actors, who performed directly among them. The intimacy of the setting had a profound impact on the way the audience engaged with the themes of the play. In traditional productions of *Macbeth*, the focus tends to be on the spectacle

of the political drama—wars, betrayals, and murders. However, in this drawing room adaptation, the focus was more on the psychological and emotional unravelling of the characters. The confined space shifted emphasis from external action to internal conflict, aligning with Carlson’s (2004) assertion that performance meaning is shaped by spatial context. The proximity of the audience to the action made Macbeth's descent into madness and Lady Macbeth’s increasing guilt not just a plot point, but an intensely visceral experience for the audience.

The murder of King Duncan, one of the most iconic moments in *Macbeth*, was handled with an air of quiet menace rather than grand violence. Instead of a bloody, theatrical reenactment, the murder was symbolized by a simple gesture: Macbeth, sitting at a dinner table with the audience, hands trembling, placing a bloodstained napkin on the floor. This understated choice created an intimate, haunting moment, emphasizing the emotional weight of the crime. As theatre critic Michael Billington (2015) observed, “The intimacy of the space creates a chilling proximity to the violence and madness at the heart of Macbeth’s descent into tyranny”. The room, a space of comfort and normalcy, was suddenly transformed into a site of moral decay and paranoia, with the audience’s intimate involvement deepening the emotional impact. The drawing room setting transformed domestic familiarity into a site of  $\text{भय}$  and moral collapse, reinforcing Fischer-Lichte’s (2008) notion of transformative performance.

In this case, the drawing room setting was not merely a backdrop but an active participant in the narrative. The audience’s proximity to the performers created a shared psychological space, allowing them to experience the tension and turmoil that comes with Macbeth’s bloody ascent to power. The domestic setting, a space usually associated with peace and security, became an arena for betrayal, guilt, and political ambition.

## **2. *The Tempest* in the Modern Home: Merging Magic and Technology**

Another striking example of Shakespeare in the drawing room is a 2018 production of *The Tempest* staged in a Manhattan apartment. This production embraced technology to evoke the magic of the play’s supernatural elements, such as the tempest itself, Prospero’s magic, and the ethereal presence of spirits like Ariel. A 2018 Manhattan apartment production of *The Tempest* integrated projection mapping and immersive sound to recreate supernatural elements. This approach aligns with Aronson’s (2018) concept of environmental scenography, where space itself becomes an active component of performance. The minimalist set design, focused

on the apartment's existing furnishings, allowed the play's larger themes of exile, revenge, and reconciliation to unfold in a modern domestic context. The production's innovative use of projection mapping and immersive soundscapes transformed the apartment into an otherworldly space. Projections on the walls turned the drawing room into a stormy sea, while spectral figures floated through the room, heightening the sense of magic and illusion.

This approach not only allowed for a reimagining of the play's fantastical elements but also brought the audience into the narrative world in an intensely personal way. With the audience members seated in the midst of the action, the boundaries between the play's magical realm and the modern domestic world were deliberately blurred. For example, when Ariel appears as a floating, disembodied figure projected onto the wall, it's not just a visual spectacle—it becomes a force within the space of the drawing room, invading the audience's reality. The apartment, once a mundane setting, is transformed into an enchanted environment, where the play's magic becomes as real as the walls surrounding the spectators.

The small, confined space of the apartment allowed for moments of personal interaction between characters, particularly between Prospero and Caliban, which would have been less impactful in a larger, more impersonal theatre. For example, when Caliban confronts Prospero, the closeness of the actors created a raw emotional tension that was impossible to ignore. By utilizing the drawing room's intimacy, the production made the play's themes of power, enslavement, and colonization more immediate and pressing.

In *The Tempest* as staged in this intimate setting, the idea of exile was magnified by the smallness of the domestic space, emphasizing the characters' isolation. Prospero's relationship with his daughter, Miranda, was explored through the quiet, domestic moments between them, such as when they prepare meals or engage in small, familial rituals. These scenes, though not conventionally theatrical, showcased the emotional core of the play—its themes of love, betrayal, and forgiveness—through the lens of domesticity, grounding its magic in everyday human interaction.

The blending of digital effects with domestic space blurred boundaries between reality and illusion, enhancing thematic concerns of exile and control. Audience immersion within the space amplified emotional engagement and interpretive participation.

### **3. *Romeo and Juliet* in the Drawing Room: A Tragic Love in Intimate Space**

A 2017 adaptation of *Romeo and Juliet* staged in a private home in Brooklyn exemplifies the profound emotional impact that can be achieved when Shakespeare's tragic love story is reinterpreted within the close confines of a drawing room. This production stripped away the typical grandiosity associated with the play, removing elaborate set designs and large crowds. The actors performed in the midst of the audience, creating a sense of immediacy and urgency that heightened the tension between the characters.

The key moments of the play—Romeo and Juliet's first meeting, their secret marriage, and their tragic deaths—were framed within the intimacy of the domestic environment. For instance, the balcony scene, usually one of the most iconic and romantic moments in the play, was reimagined within a small living room. Juliet, standing at the top of a staircase, spoke her lines to Romeo, who was seated on a couch below her. The audience, seated around the room, became voyeurs to the couple's private world, making their love story feel both intimate and tragically doomed.

The production's minimalistic aesthetic, focusing on only a few props and the actors' movements, allowed the themes of love and fate to emerge more powerfully. The family feud between the Capulets and Montagues was also represented through the domestic space, as the household tensions were made more tangible by the characters' physical proximity. The presence of the audience in the same room as the actors created a sense of being trapped in a world of family conflict, amplifying the sense of hopelessness that defines the play's tragic conclusion.

According to White (2012), audience proximity fosters empathy and participatory engagement. This production demonstrated how minimalism and spatial intimacy heighten the affective power of Shakespeare's tragedy.

### **4. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in a Suburban Living Room: Whimsicality and Modernity Collide**

In a 2020 Los Angeles production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* staged in a suburban living room, the playful, magical elements of the play were brought into a modern, middle-class context. Modern props and digital references highlighted the absurdity of romantic

entanglements, aligning with postdramatic experimentation (Lehmann, 2006). The production used contemporary costumes and props—such as a modern television, smartphone screens, and even furniture arrangements—to emphasize the play’s themes of love and illusion while simultaneously highlighting the absurdity of its characters’ actions. Puck, the mischievous fairy, was portrayed as a hyperactive teenager obsessed with social media, while the lovers were outfitted in casual, modern attire.

The use of the suburban living room as a setting allowed for a juxtaposition between the whimsical, magical world of the fairies and the mundane, predictable world of the humans. The limited space of the living room amplified the sense of chaos and confusion that characterizes the play. For example, the fairies’ interventions in the lovers’ lives were made even more disorienting as the actors performed acrobatic feats in and around the audience’s seating area. The audience, in turn, was fully immersed in the action, forced to navigate the maze of modernity and fantasy alongside the characters.

What was particularly innovative about this production was the way it used the domestic space to interrogate the concept of love itself. The restricted environment of the living room, where everyone is constantly in close quarters, mirrors the emotional intensity and confusion of the lovers’ desires. The resulting intimacy and discomfort played into the theme of unrequited love and romantic confusion, making the play’s often absurd situations feel fresh and relevant to contemporary viewers.

Each of the case studies presented demonstrates how these domestic settings provide opportunities for recontextualizing Shakespeare’s plays, bringing fresh perspectives to well-known stories. Whether by emphasizing the psychological complexities of characters, blending modern technology with classical texts, or interrogating societal norms through the lens of domesticity, these drawing room adaptations challenge the conventions of theatrical space and audience interaction.

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

While the drawing room offers unique opportunities for innovation, it also presents significant challenges. The limited space constrains movement and staging, requiring directors to find creative solutions. Elaborate battle scenes or crowd sequences, for example, must be reimagined or omitted entirely. This paring down risks losing some of the spectacle and

grandeur traditionally associated with Shakespearean drama. However, such limitations encourage creative reinterpretation, aligning with avant-garde priorities of innovation and experimentation (Innes, 1993).

However, these constraints also serve as a catalyst for creativity. Directors are compelled to focus on the psychological and thematic dimensions of the text, aligning with the avant-garde emphasis on substance over form. The intimacy of the setting also fosters a sense of shared experience, breaking down the barriers between performers and audience members. As Fischer-Lichte (2008) observes, “Theater in non-traditional spaces invites a new mode of perception, where the audience becomes an active participant in the creation of meaning” (Fischer-Lichte 57).

## **Conclusion**

Representing Shakespeare’s plays in a modern drawing room is an avant-garde practice that redefines the relationship between space, text, and audience. By embracing minimalism, intimacy, and innovative staging techniques, directors can reimagine the Bard’s works for contemporary audiences, making them more immediate and relevant. The drawing room, as both a physical and symbolic space, becomes a microcosm for exploring Shakespeare’s universal themes of ambition, love, betrayal, and redemption.

Through these adaptations, Shakespeare’s works remain as dynamic and relevant as ever. The drawing room—both as a physical space and as a metaphorical site of emotional engagement—has proven itself to be an invaluable tool for redefining how we experience the Bard’s plays. As theatre continues to evolve, these intimate, avant-garde performances ensure that Shakespeare’s timeless themes continue to resonate with contemporary audiences.

This approach not only reinvigorates Shakespeare’s plays but also challenges traditional notions of theatre, fostering a deeper connection between performers and spectators. As Shakespeare himself wrote, “All the world’s a stage,” and the modern drawing room proves that even the most domestic of settings can serve as a canvas for his timeless insights into the human condition.

Drawing on performance theory and contemporary practice, this study demonstrates that such adaptations not only preserve Shakespeare’s relevance but also enhance his works’

emotional and cultural resonance. In an era of evolving theatrical forms, the drawing room emerges as a powerful site for reimagining classical drama, reaffirming Shakespeare's enduring capacity to engage and transform audiences.

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